

Iron County Register

BY ELI D. AKE.
IRONTON, MISSOURI.

Shadows on the Snow.

By B. L. FARJEON.

AUTHOR OF "BLADE-OF-GRASS," "GOLDEN GRAIN," "JOSHUA MARVEL," ETC., ETC.

PART I.—CONTINUED.

Despite himself, William was touched, knowing how frugally the doctor lived. Dr. Bax was not blind to this better mood of his companion, but he did not appear to openly observe it.

"Is this your yearly custom?" asked William.

"It is; and one of my best pleasures. We must be off now."

They had not far to go. The doctor drew rein again at a hovel, from the small window-panes of which a single rush-light could be seen burning. He knocked at the door.

"Who's there?" cried a voice.

"Dr. Santa Claus," replied the doctor, in a loud cheery tone, "with medicine."

The door was immediately opened by a poorly-dressed woman, and the doctor entered with some parcels in his hand. William remained outside, and presently Dr. Bax beckoned him in, saying the pony would stand still. The room was very scantily furnished. In one corner, on an old wooden bedstead, a man lay asleep, and by his side a child, also asleep. On the rail at the foot of the bed, the child's eyes should fall upon it when she woke, was a wooden soldier, placed there by the doctor; and the parcels he had taken from the dog-cart were on a bare deal table. The woman, who had been ironing, and who had passed in her work to admit her visitors, was regarding the gifts with tears in her eyes.

"I wanted you to look at our child," said Dr. Bax to William. "Is she not a little beauty?"

The mother turned down the coverlet with pride and affection to allow William to see the pretty creature. Dr. Bax stooped and kissed the child, and William was impelled to do so likewise.

"Has your man complained much to-day?" asked Dr. Bax.

"Yes, all day long; he's asleep now from sheer weariness; it'd take a deal to wake him. His back has been paining him dreadfully, and all the feeling has quite gone out of his legs. He don't know when I am rubbing them, poor dear! Before he went to sleep he was wishing for a Christmas dinner; it would be the last, he said, he should never be able to eat it. I didn't know what to say. Heaven only knows where a Christmas dinner was to come from, but I can give it to him now. God will bless you, doctor."

"Come, William," said Dr. Bax, hastily, "we must be going again. Good-night. Some time to-morrow I shall be here to see how your man is."

On the road the doctor said:

"Unless a man chooses to walk blindly through the world, he can see everywhere about him sacred and beautiful evidences of God's love to the poor than among the rich, for from the very necessities of their condition, self-sacrifice—the holiest form in which love can show itself—is more demanded. The poor woman whom we have just left has not been treated by her husband with tenderness or consideration. While he was in health, he squandered his money at the public-house, and never saved a penny. Six months ago he was a miserly, stingy, selfish, and cruel man. He was sent to his back, which will soon end his days. Since that time he has been unable to move from his bed, and the woman, without murmuring, has worked unceasingly for him and their child. She will soon be half-starved, night, to finish the washing and ironing she obtains from the neighbors; and love will uphold her through all. When her man dies, after her first passion of grief at that lifting of a heavy load from her, she will devote herself to her child, whom she will work for with patience and cheerfulness, grateful for the burden love imposes upon her."

Dr. Bax cast a furtive glance at William, but the young man slipped away fast; and the downward lines on his forehead showed that though the doctor's words had reached him, their meaning was lost upon him.

The first visit was the keynote to all that followed. The doctor placed the existence of which William had hitherto been ignorant, and saw scenes of domestic life which would have left a deep impression upon him, had the eyes of his mind been open to anything but the contemplation of his own misery. But he was almost blind to them, so dazed was he with grief. It certainly was not the result of special design—for William was not his companion by premeditation, and he, the doctor, carefully marked down—that, wherever Dr. Bax stopped, he elicited from the commonest and poorest of the poor and common people he visited sparks of human love which shone with a holy light among the ashes of mispent and wasted lives. Even from those who had fallen very, very low, and who, snatching the gifts he proffered, threw them aside out of his reach, and thanked him with assumed humility—even from those who, after a quarter of an hour, when he had proclaimed his errand, and when he had more and more inattentive to the doctor's errands, and more and more impatient for the coming of the moment which was to make or mar his life—when the last shilling taken from the doctor's purse, and he and William stood by the side of the empty dog-cart.

"Jump up," said Dr. Bax, William raised his hand, and listened. A church clock was chiming; it wanted but a quarter of an hour to midnight. Mechanically William turned from the doctor, and commenced to walk in the direction of Warleycombe.

"Stop, William!" cried the doctor; "where are you going?"

"I have an act of duty to perform," replied William, "and I must be alone."

Dr. Bax hastened after the young man and arrested his steps.

"An act of duty!" he said; "at this time of night?"

"At this time of night, and no other."

"It is troublesome walking through the snow. Let me set you on your way."

"I have told you I must be alone."

He did not speak roughly; his voice was cold, and there was a vacant ring in it which it pained Dr. Bax to hear.

"Not a pleasant duty, William?"

"No. Ask me no further questions. Good-night."

But Dr. Bax would not so lightly part with him.

"You distress me; I thought we were friends."

William laughed harshly. The bitter emphasis placed on the word by Stephen Winkworth had robbed it of its good meaning.

"The duty before you?" persisted the doctor. "Is it a secret one?"

"It is."

"The knowledge of which is not to be confided even to you?"

"Not to be confided even to you."

"Is it no light duty, William?"

"I wish to God I had died before it came in my way to perform! I will say no more, and I can not stop longer with you."

William, with no more force than was necessary, disengaged himself from the doctor, and, waving his hand in adieu, plunged directly through the snow. Dr. Bax gazed sadly after him until he was out of sight.

"I hoped to have had a good night's rest," he mused, as he mounted his seat, and slowly drove away; "and not to be wakened by a knock—not a wink! Confound all mortality, I say! If men took a tenth part as much pains to make themselves happy as they take to make themselves miserable. As it is, I have no patience with it!"

This being uttered in a tone loud enough for the pony to hear, drew from that creature a determined protest; he stood stock-still, and would not budge an inch in response to his words and impatient urging to get on. Not until Dr. Bax tried the soothing system, and spoke to him in his usual mild and affectionate manner, would he allow himself to be coaxed. And when he had covered two or three hundred yards in his accustomed easy jog-trot, he pulled up again of his own impulse, to make sure, from his master's gently spoken entreaty to put on the steam, that all he had to do was to say. William Fairfield walked so swiftly that before midnight Warleycombe Lodge was in view. The night was cold, but he was in a hot fever. He looked toward the house in expectant dread, but there was no sign of life within or without. All was silent and still as death. The snow lay lightly upon roof and cave, upon tree and plain, and made the silence more impressive in its spiritual effect than the silence which is accompanied by darkness. A doubt upon him whether what had passed between him and Stephen Winkworth was real or a dream, but it did not linger in his mind. "I am not mad yet," he muttered, "and I am not a fool. I know what I have done. I know that Stephen could not have lied to me. He conjured up the picture which presented itself to him whichever way he turned—the picture of Laura and her lover! He saw her, and he saw her in the light of affection; he saw her, the woman he loved, lay her head upon this man's shoulder; and he bit blood into his lips with jealous rage."

Suddenly the silence was invaded by the peal of the Christmas bells, which pealed joyously over field and hill, proclaiming the birth of peace and love. To the high-born and lowly alike they sung the holier theme, in the light of which earthly and sordid desires fade away.

Dear bells! that bring glad light to weary eyes, that whisper courage to despairing souls, that instill hope into fainting hearts—ring on, dear bells, and teach your lesson anew! Humanity should be made to know that love and a heavenly glory shines above her head. Ring on, dear bells, the time has come! Forth into the places where misery lurks; where crime and destruction lie in wait for the angels; where are angels (compelled to live, and comprehending nothing but their own hard laws) breeds hapless generations; where it is not possible for virtue to take root and flower—forth into those places, dear bells, and sing to the poor your enter, with love and pity in their radiant eyes; and Heaven smiles upon them as they return with dirt-stained wings, the sacred evidence of sacred work performed. Ring on, dear bells, and teach once more your beautiful lesson! The pulse of the world is stirred with tender memories. The happy mother aroused from sleep, whispers to her child, lying awake by her side: "Dear child, dear child, the Christmas bells are ringing!" The girl-woman, musing on the day that shall make her a happy wife, sings to her heart, to the rhythm of the bells: "Dear love, dear love, the Christmas bells are ringing!" The rich man smiles, and says to his wife: "The Christmas bells are ringing!" The poor man, sweet Christmas bells! The air is filled with your music, which travels far across the snow-white land. Over forests of trees whose branches gleam with beauty, on to the glorious sea, where the sailor, battling for dear life with the raging storm, thinks of what is dearer to him than life, and cries to his mate in the midst of the darkness: "At home, old boy, the Christmas bells are ringing!"

They rang in William Fairfield's ears, and bewildered him. He was deaf to their tender whisperings; they jarred upon his soul, and he strove, with a wild motion of his arms, to cast them from him. He was so disturbed upon the treachery of the girl to whom he had given his heart. This was his Christmas Eve! Next Christmas they were to have a merry party at their own home; it had been arranged that night, for he proved Stephen's tale to be true where would his next Christmas be spent? He laughed in helpless derision. His future was blasted. What recked he now where they rang? Some short distance from Warleycombe Lodge, but within sight of it, stood an old garbled tree, profligate and queerly knotted excrescences and twisted limbs and branches. It was so old that there had rotted away at its base a space sufficiently large to allow a man to seat himself easily. Here William mechanically rested; and, with a weary body but active mind, set himself to the task of watching Reuben

Harriid's house. Above him spread the fantastic branches of the tree, hung about with icicles and fringed with delicate and graceful traceries in snow. In the midst of the most delicate of the house he could not avoid being struck with their beauty, and at odd moments he turned his eyes upward to observe them. Presently a singular fancy crept upon him. The branches assumed the shape of and form. Crooked twigs became transformed into grotesque figures, perfect in limb and feature, and though there was not one among them that was not out of all reasonable proportion, not one seemed monstrous. They were all pygmies, and sat or stood in unnatural attitudes—with their legs twisted under them, with their arms curled around their bodies, with their faces between their knees; here an elf, there a dwarf, lying at full length, and bending over toward him at a dangerous angle. The unfamiliar and curious figures were motionless for a moment, but at the end of that time animation passed into their bodies. Motion came into their limbs, expression to their features. And of the hundreds of strange faces which the tree was filled, there was not one that was not directed toward him, there was not one eye that was not fixed upon him. Some smiled with the familiarity of old acquaintanceship, others frowned with severe censure, and some gazed at him with a great knot in the middle of his forehead and his eyes so sternly that he turned away in anger at the delusion which he had allowed to take possession of his senses. As he turned, his attention was attracted by the beautiful appearance of the hedge-row which lined the boundary of Reuben Harriid's land. It was nearly a man high; and as he gazed into the tangled skeins of bare and naked bush, snow-laden in the purest white, he saw a thousand starting pictures in the maze. Through the interlaced vista he saw castles and rocks with the glow of sunlight upon them; merging gradually into the phantasy of many suns setting with a fiery light upon a dozen battlefields, with shreds of armies flying from bloody pursuers; merging again into grave-yards lying in the light of pale, cold moons, which threw a ghastly glare upon a myriad of white specters in the winding paths, gauntly stretching out their attenuated limbs. And there—wonder upon wonder!—was the same stern old man with the knot in his forehead, eyeing him more seriously than ever, and, with a monstrous, disproportionate finger beckoning him to approach. Whom did this old man resemble? His face was surely familiar to William. Ah, yes; it was Dr. Bax. No; Stephen Winkworth. Wrong again. It was one of the poorest of persons to whom the little doctor had been good that night, and who, crazy with drink, had threatened to do them both an injury if they did not instantly turn. Wrong again. It was the toy soldier which Dr. Bax had fastened to the foot of the child's bed. Still wrong. It was Alice, the deformed girl, with her sicken hair cut short. Wrong once more. It was an entirely strange face—a face he had never before looked upon. William, with his eyes, then still stood the grim old man with his gigantic finger, bidding him to come.

But now the figure was no longer alone. On every side arose hundreds of white phantoms, and, as he looked, William, with the same beckoning gesture, to join their company. As he watched them, with increasing amazement, their numbers grew until the entire landscape became filled with motioning snow-draws; and, as he looked upward into the phantom branches of the tree, myriad white faces crowded down upon him, urging him to rise. Compelled to obey, he stood upon his feet, and, looking toward the house, found that the branches of that tree and hedges had vanished, and that he was standing on a great plain, carpeted with snow as far as the eye could reach, without a single speck or stain upon it to show that it had ever sustained the weight of a foot. In his endeavor to follow their weird and ghostly motions, the surface of the snow did not present a single mark to denote that it was trodden. And now a miracle occurred. A wild, threatening wind, which had been blowing in the distance, and the ranks divided, a figure of surpassing loveliness approached. It was that of a beautiful woman, with a crown of crystals upon her head. A thousand stars of icicle gleamed in her hair, and her robes of snowy whiteness, which hung loosely upon her form. Her limbs and features were faultlessly molded, and in her eyes dwelt an expression of such heavenly love and goodness that William was powerless; his limbs refused to obey his impulse. Closer and closer she approached. Clear as spotless crystal, she stood before him, lustrous, beautiful, with a crown of crystals upon her head, and her robes of snowy whiteness, which hung loosely upon her form. Her limbs and features were faultlessly molded, and in her eyes dwelt an expression of such heavenly love and goodness that William was powerless; his limbs refused to obey his impulse. Closer and closer she approached. 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